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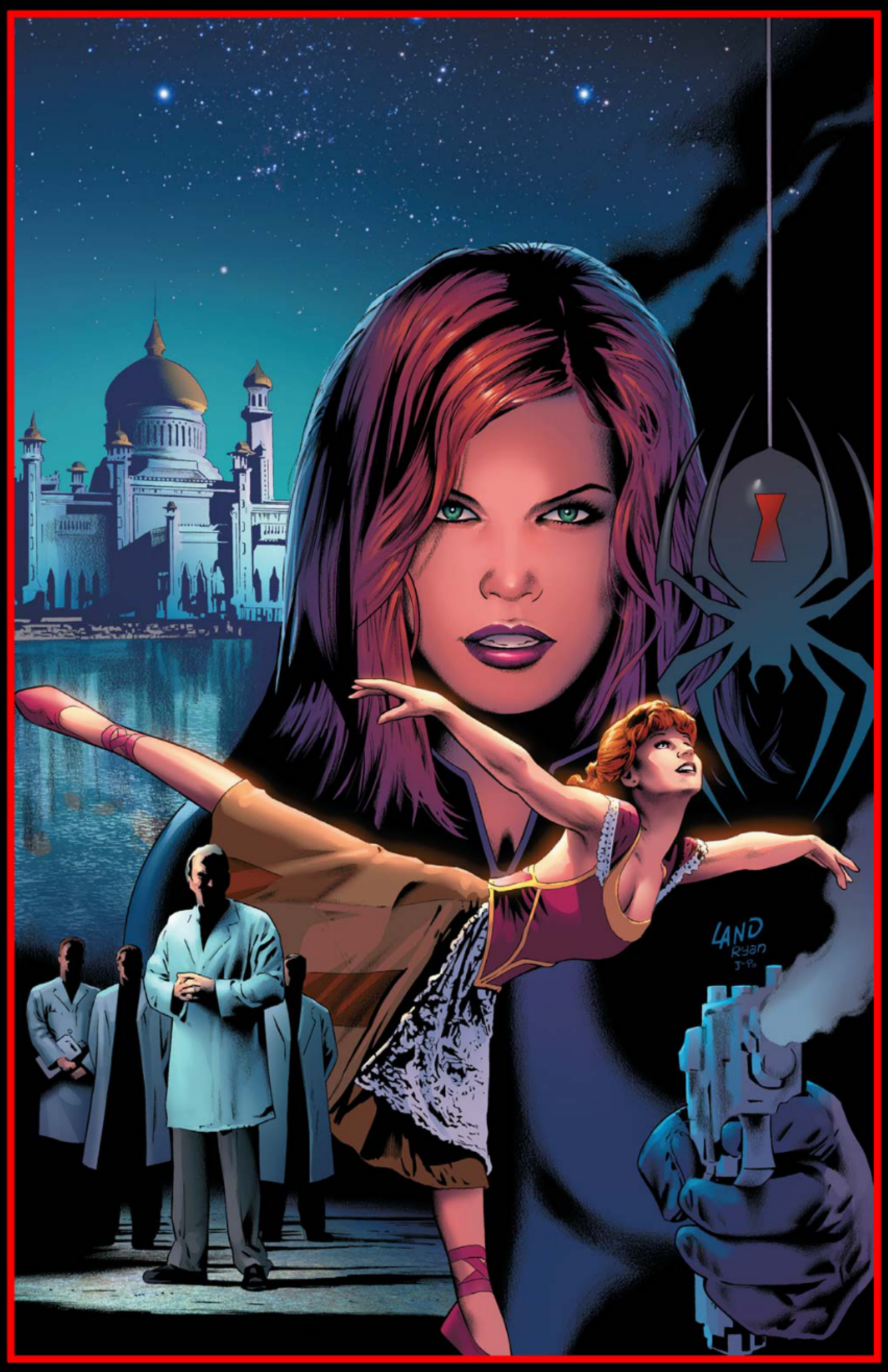
RICHARD K. MORGAN • BILL SIENKIEWICZ • GORAN PARLOV
BLACK WIDOW
LAND
RYAN,
J-PO

Part 5: A Field in the East



The Black Widow. Russian intelligence agent, KGB-recruited. A Soviet weapon of the Cold War. Legend of the covert Moscow espionage academy known as the Red Room. Later, a defector to the U.S. and a freelance agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.

Now, a retired spy who's just been pulled back into the game, thanks to a Russian assassin sent by an unknown man, wealthy and powerful, who wants her dead. He's already terminated several other ex-KGB operatives, all of whom were women, and one of whom was pregnant and taking massive painkillers, along with an unknown substance called Medusagen.

Two new agents are sent out after the Widow. Max and Kestrel are freelance operatives working for the North Institute, a powerful American agency with vast government resources. They are rapidly closing in, and even the help of Phil Dexter, an old ally from her S.H.I.E.L.D. days, may not be enough to buy Natasha the time she needs to uncover the truth.

The trail of deception and murder takes Natasha all the way back to Russia. Turns out her old intelligence academy, the Red Room, survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. Now trading as 2R, they have unknown ties to Gynacon, a U.S. cosmetics corporation.

While scouring Moscow trying to discover 2R's future plans, Natasha instead meets Grigor Ivanovich, an old Red Room scientist who shatters her past with a chilling revelation:

All of her memories prior to becoming the Black Widow are a lie. Her early career as a ballerina, her childhood, all of it. Implanted psychochemically in order to induce loyalty to the Motherland, bolstered with crippling adverse responses that blocked her from discovering the truth--Natasha was one of twenty-seven Black Widow deep-cover operatives deployed during the Cold War.

And she's now mad as hell about it.

Richard K. Morgan
WRITER

Bill Sienkiewicz & Goran Parlov
ART

Dan Brown
COLORIST

VC's Cory Petit
LETTERER

Greg Land and Matt Ryan
COVER

Omar Otieku
PRODUCTION

Jennifer Lee
EDITOR

Axel Alonso
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Joe Quesada
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Dan Buckley
PUBLISHER

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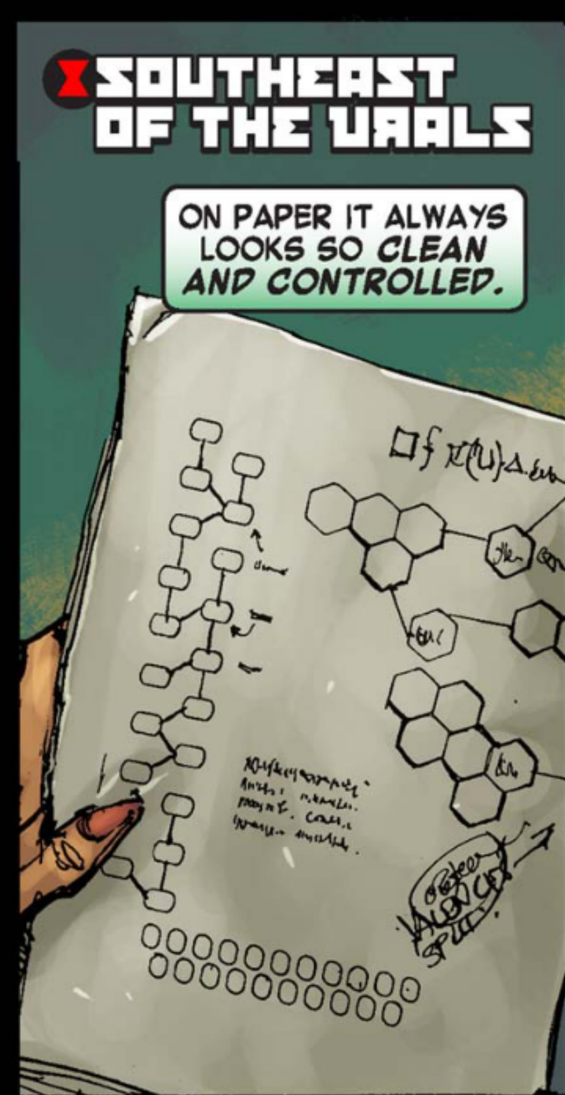
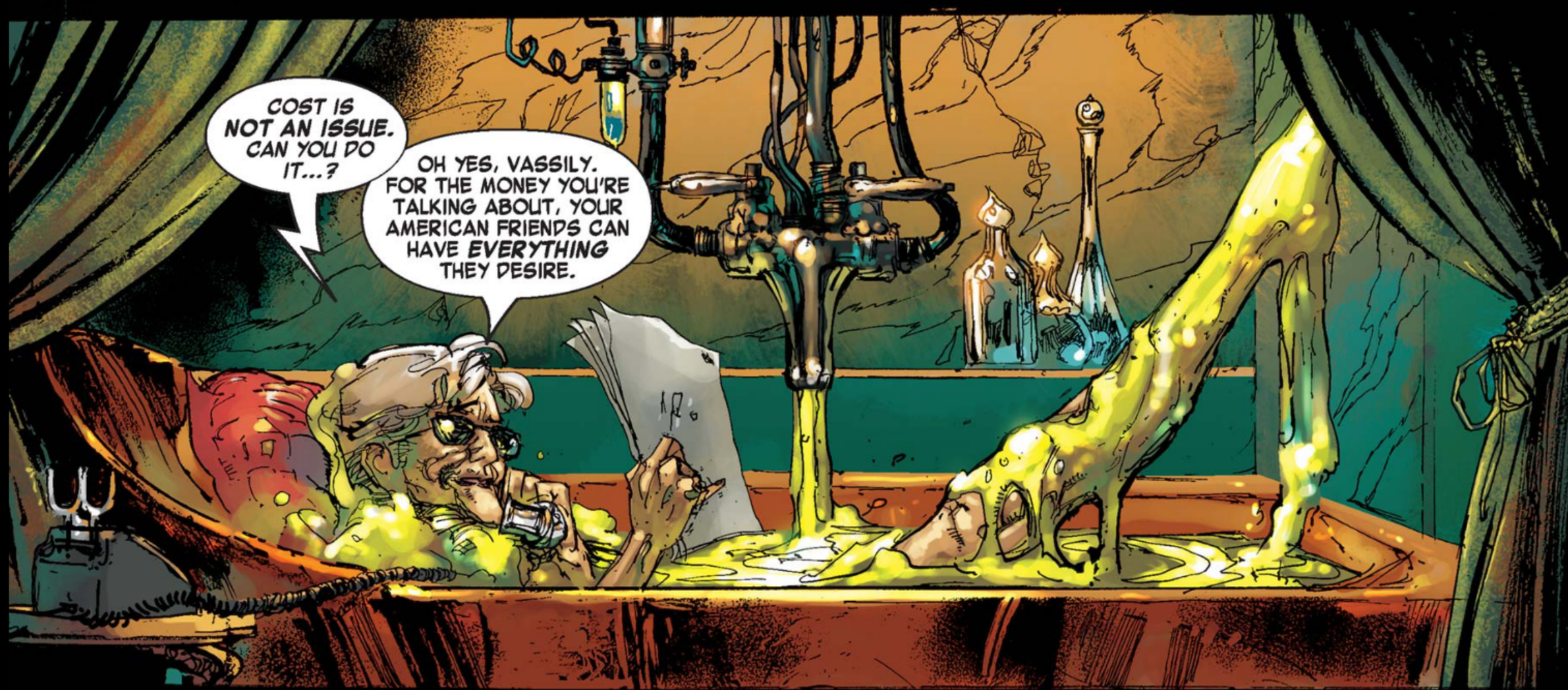
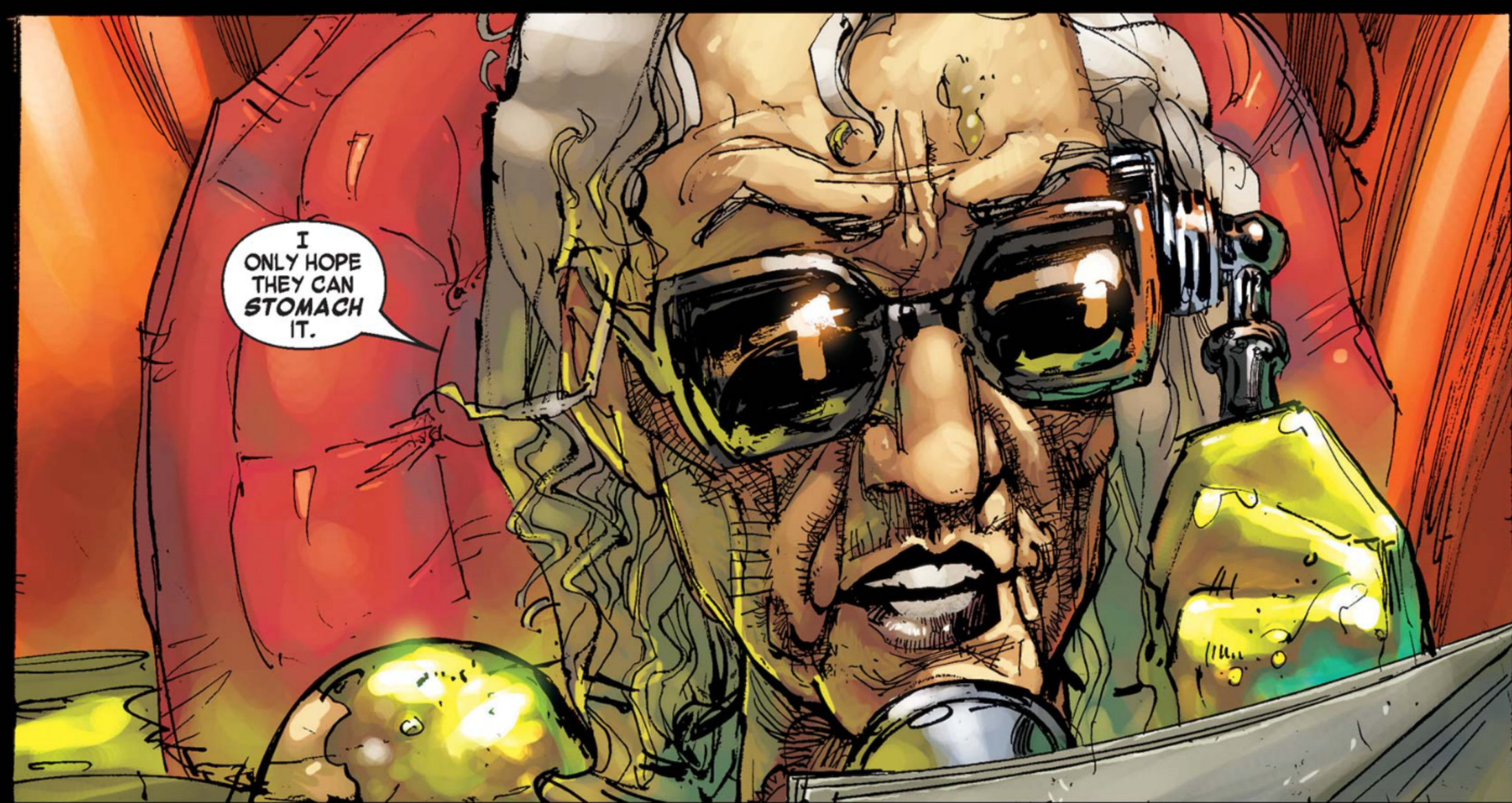

SOUTHEAST OF THE URALS
ON PAPER IT ALWAYS LOOKS SO CLEAN AND CONTROLLED.

YOU'D BARELY THINK IT HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH HUMAN BEINGS AT ALL.

SO...?
SO BUILDING A MOLECULE THIS COMPLEX WON'T BE EASY OR CHEAP.

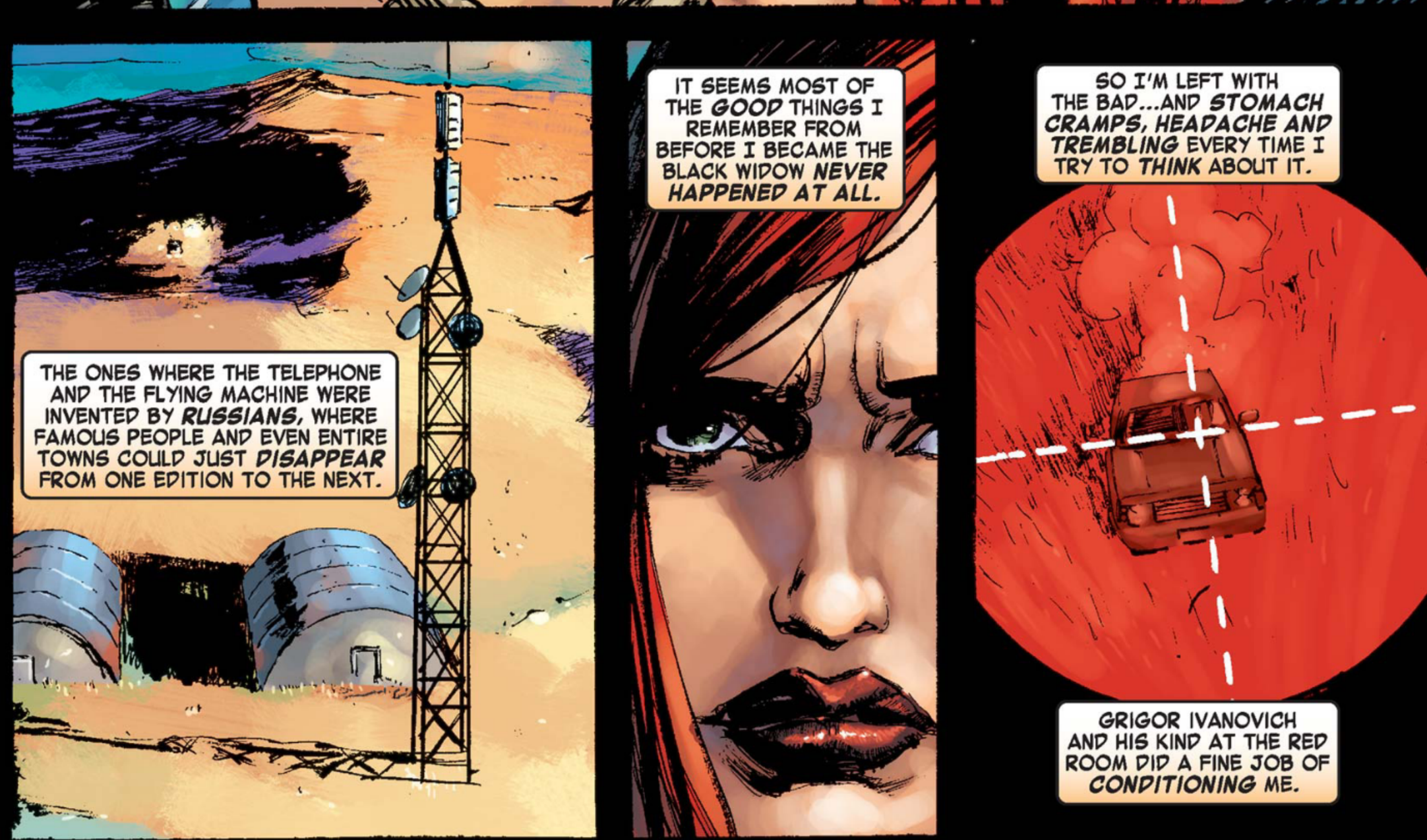

COST IS NOT AN ISSUE. CAN YOU DO IT...?
OH YES, VASSILY. FOR THE MONEY YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT, YOUR AMERICAN FRIENDS CAN HAVE EVERYTHING THEY DESIRE.


I ONLY HOPE THEY CAN STOMACH IT.

GURRRRRRGH!!!!!!!!

ARE YOU--
I'M *FINE.* HOW MUCH FURTHER IS IT?
IT HASN'T BEEN A GOOD TRIP.

JUST OVER THOSE HILLS. WE'RE NEARLY THERE.
A LONG, HARD TREK IN A 4-WHEEL DRIVE *THE POLICE* ARE PROBABLY LOOKING FOR BY NOW.
AND I'VE SPENT MOST OF IT FINDING OUT MY MEMORIES ARE ABOUT AS *RELIABLE* AS A *STALIN-ERA ENCYCLOPEDIA.*


THE ONES WHERE THE TELEPHONE AND THE FLYING MACHINE WERE INVENTED BY *RUSSIANS,* WHERE FAMOUS PEOPLE AND EVEN ENTIRE TOWNS COULD JUST *DISAPPEAR* FROM ONE EDITION TO THE NEXT.
IT SEEMS MOST OF THE *GOOD* THINGS I REMEMBER FROM BEFORE I BECAME THE BLACK WIDOW *NEVER HAPPENED AT ALL.*
SO I'M LEFT WITH THE BAD...AND *STOMACH CRAMPS, HEADACHE AND TREMBLING* EVERY TIME I TRY TO *THINK* ABOUT IT.
GRIGOR IVANOVICH AND HIS KIND AT THE RED ROOM DID A FINE JOB OF *CONDITIONING* ME.

I THINK I'D KILL GRIGOR FOR HIS PART IN IT ALL--

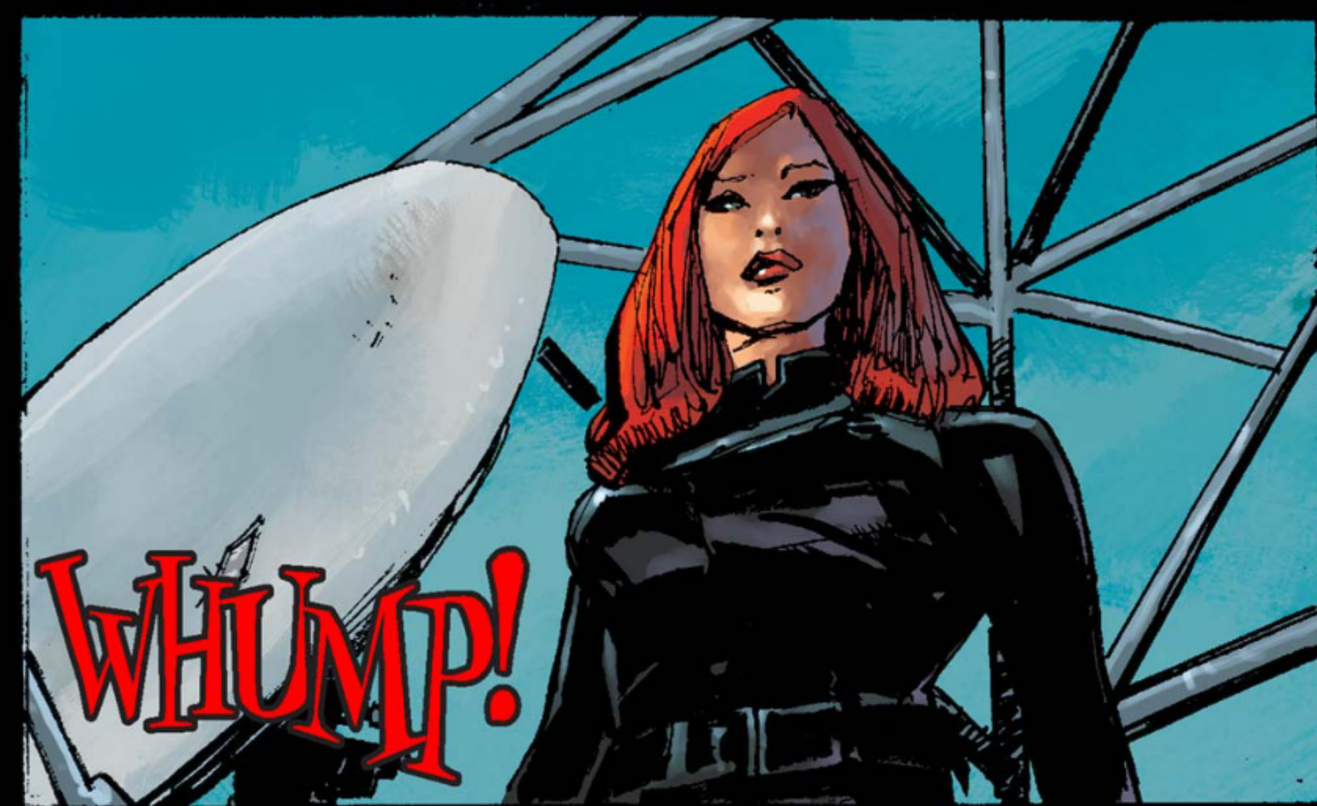
--IF HE WEREN'T SO USEFUL.
OKAY, PAL, TIME TO SAY GOOD NIGHT...
I REALLY WOULDN'T IF I WERE YOU.

WHO--?
THROW THE RIFLE DOWN.

GOOD. NOW YOU JUMP.

BUT--

AAAAGH!


WHUMP!

NYAAAGH!
AAAGH, MY LEG, MY F--

NOW THEN...

...YOU DON'T LIVE AROUND HERE, DO YOU? WHERE ARE YOU PEOPLE BASED? WHO'S GIVING THE ORDERS?

I...WILL NOT...TELL YOU ANYTHING...

NOT THIS AGAIN.
SUIT YOURSELF.

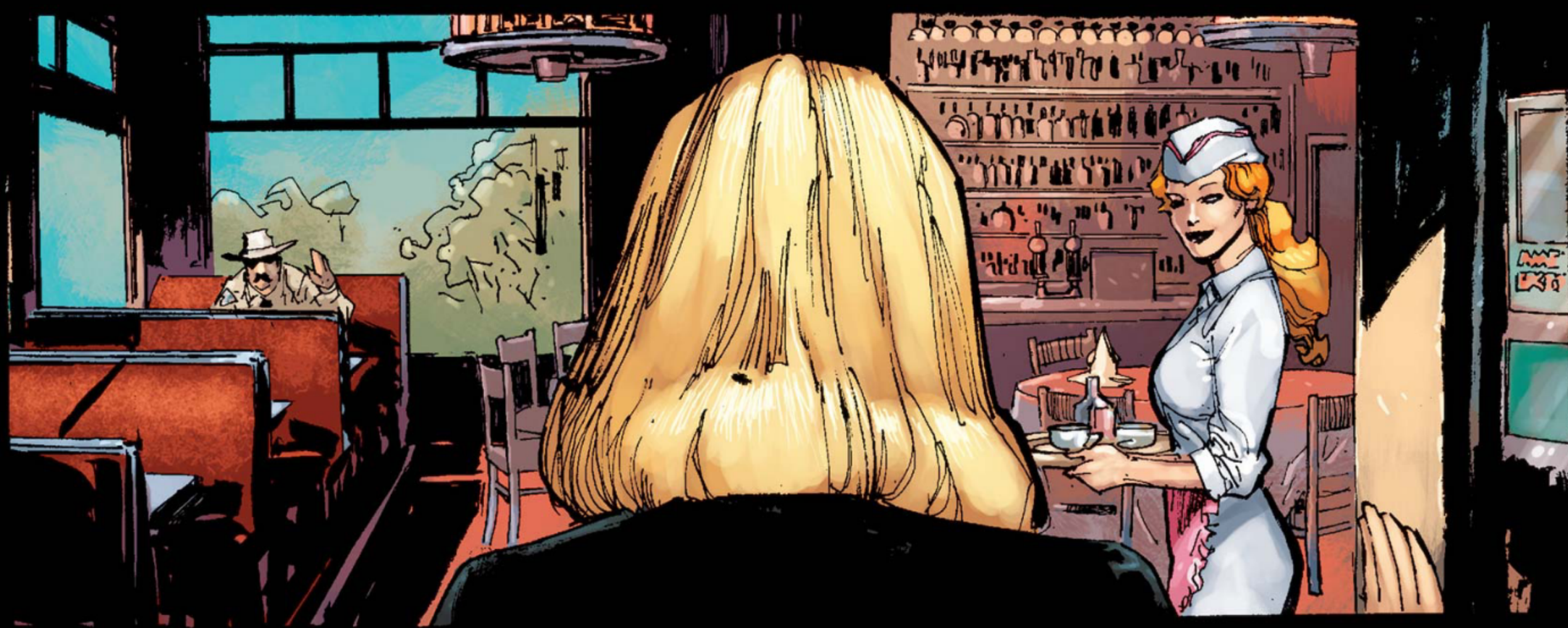
I SAW DOG TURDS ON THE WAY IN. GOT TO BE A WILD PACK AROUND HERE SOMEWHERE.
YOU BE SURE AND SCREAM IF THEY SHOW UP.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING?
TO LOOK AROUND.
BUT HE'S HURT. YOU CAN'T--

YOU'RE ON THIN ICE GIVING ME MORAL LECTURES, GRIGOR IVANOVICH.
AND I WASN'T JOKING ABOUT THOSE DOGS. I'D WAIT IN THE CAR IF I WERE YOU.

I AM NOT WAITING IN THE DAMN CAR!
YES, YOU ARE. I LOVE YOU DEARLY, MAX, BUT I'M SICK OF THIS MACHO KICK WE'RE ON. NOW YOU GIVE ME SOME TIME ALONE WITH THIS GUY. GO FOR A WALK, IF YOU HAVE TO.
SHERIFF
NEW MEXICO

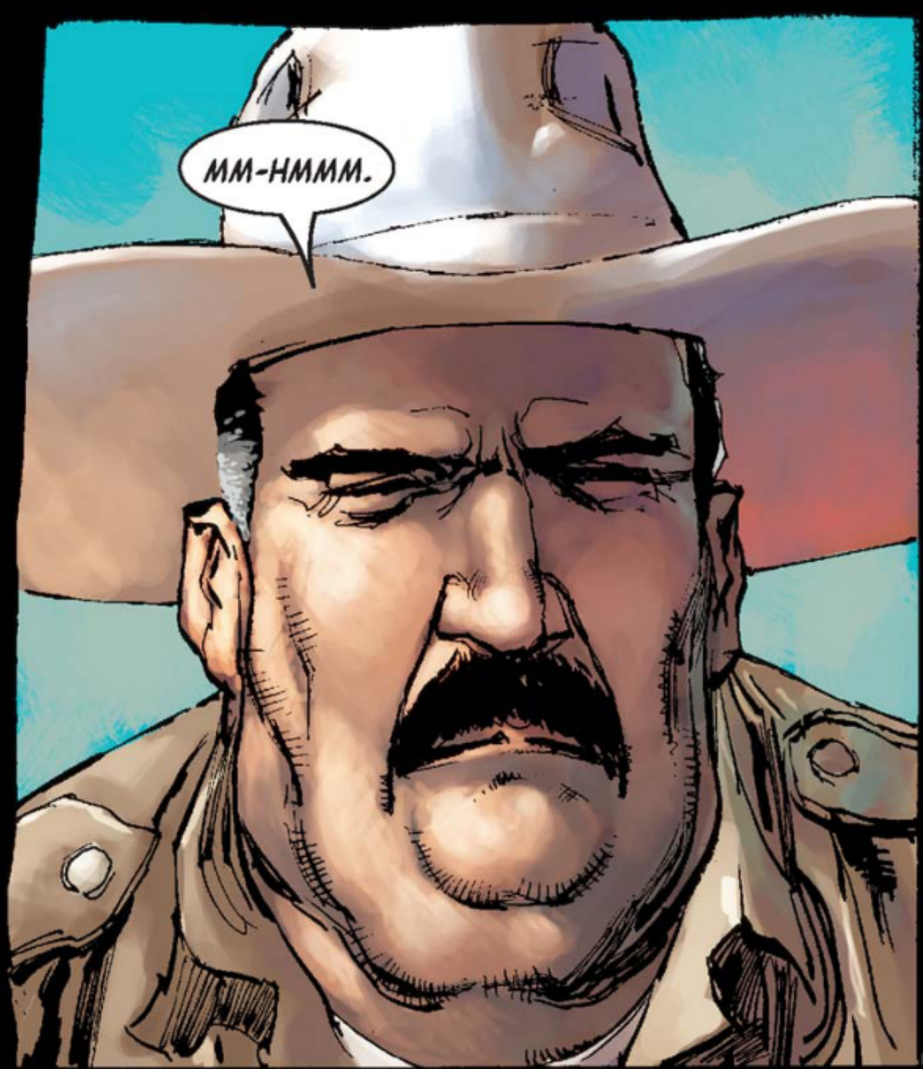
WON'T BE LONG.
THERE'S SOME SPECIAL REASON YOU HAD TO MEET HIM IN THIS DUMP?
YES. I LIKE THE COFFEE IN THIS DUMP.



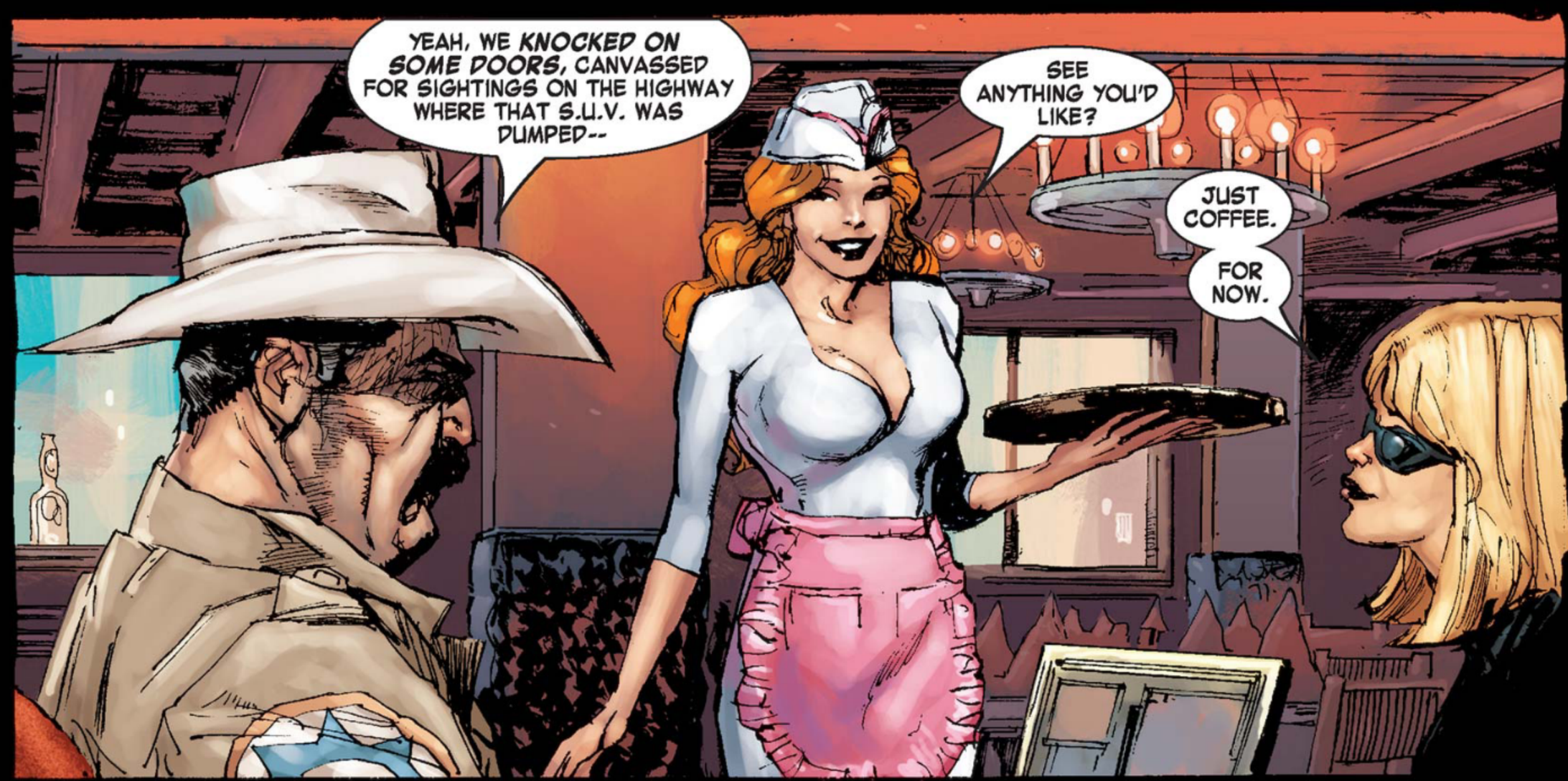
MA'AM.
SHERIFF. THANKS SO MUCH FOR COMING IN TO SEE ME. I APPRECIATE YOU TAKING THE TIME.

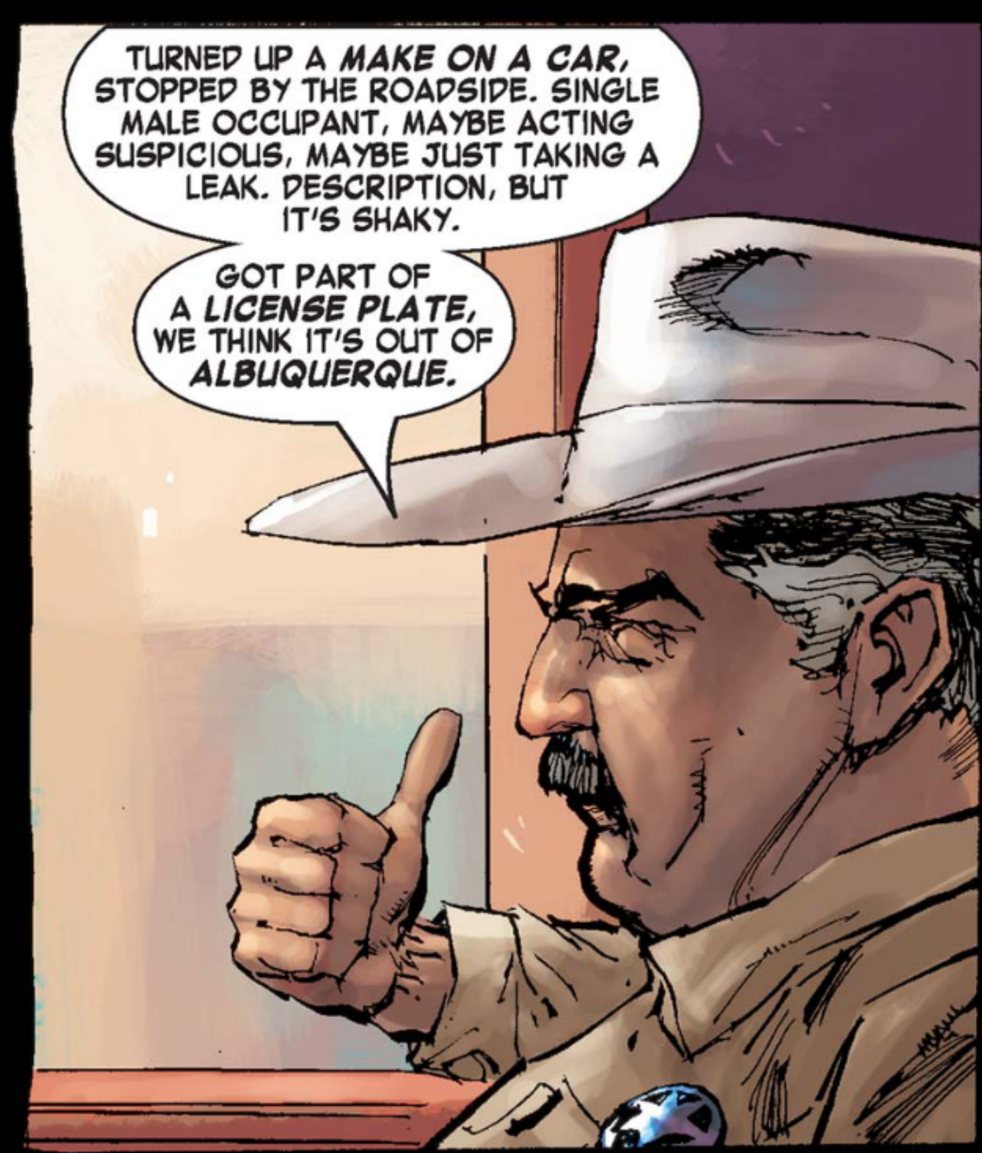
YOUR PARTNER'S NOT COMING IN, THEN?
NO.
WELL, I SURE APPRECIATE THAT, MA'AM. MAN'S A SERIOUS A--
Hotel

LET'S NOT GO THERE, PLEASE, SHERIFF. HE IS MY PARTNER.
AND ONCE, UNDER FIRE, HE SAVED MY LIFE AT VERY GREAT RISK TO HIS OWN.


MM-HMMM.

THAT'S THE WAY LIFE IS.
I GUESS...
SO WHILE WE WERE CHASING OUR TAILS OUT OF STATE, DID YOU HAVE ANY LUCK WITH REAL POLICE WORK?


YEAH, WE KNOCKED ON SOME DOORS, CANVASSED FOR SIGHTINGS ON THE HIGHWAY WHERE THAT S.U.V. WAS DUMPED--
SEE ANYTHING YOU'D LIKE?
JUST COFFEE.
FOR NOW.


TURNED UP A MAKE ON A CAR, STOPPED BY THE ROADSIDE. SINGLE MALE OCCUPANT, MAYBE ACTING SUSPICIOUS, MAYBE JUST TAKING A LEAK. DESCRIPTION, BUT IT'S SHAKY.
GOT PART OF A LICENSE PLATE, WE THINK IT'S OUT OF ALBUQUERQUE.

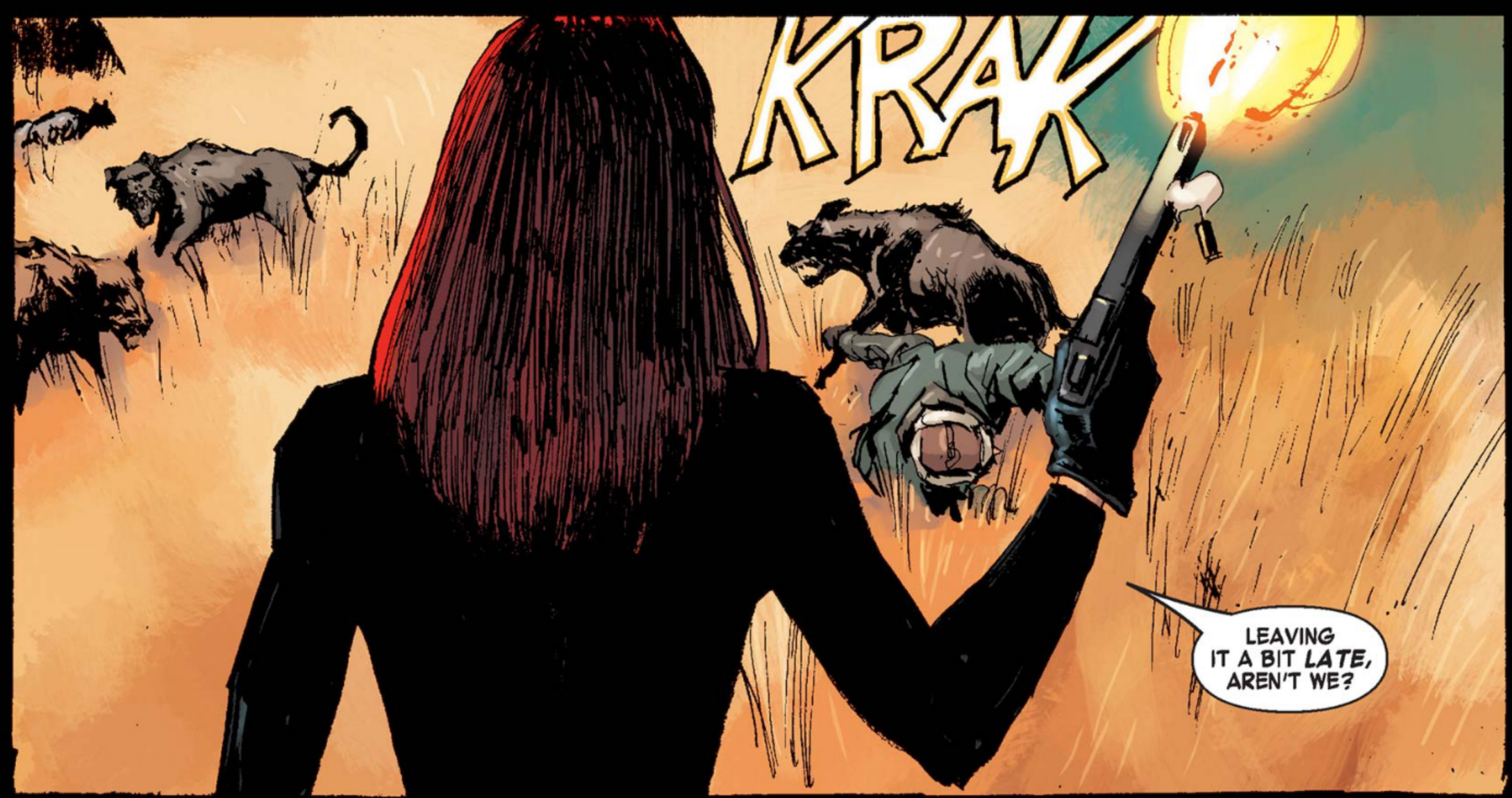
AND OF COURSE, WE'D LIKE TO RUN ALL THIS THROUGH YOUR N.S.A. DATABASES--
BUT THAT DOG AIN'T GOING TO HUNT, RIGHT?

NNNNRRRGH

NNNNNNNNRRRGH
AAGH, NO, NO, HELP, PLEASE...

NO, NO, GOD, PLEASE, I'LL TELL Y--
NNNNNNNRRRGH

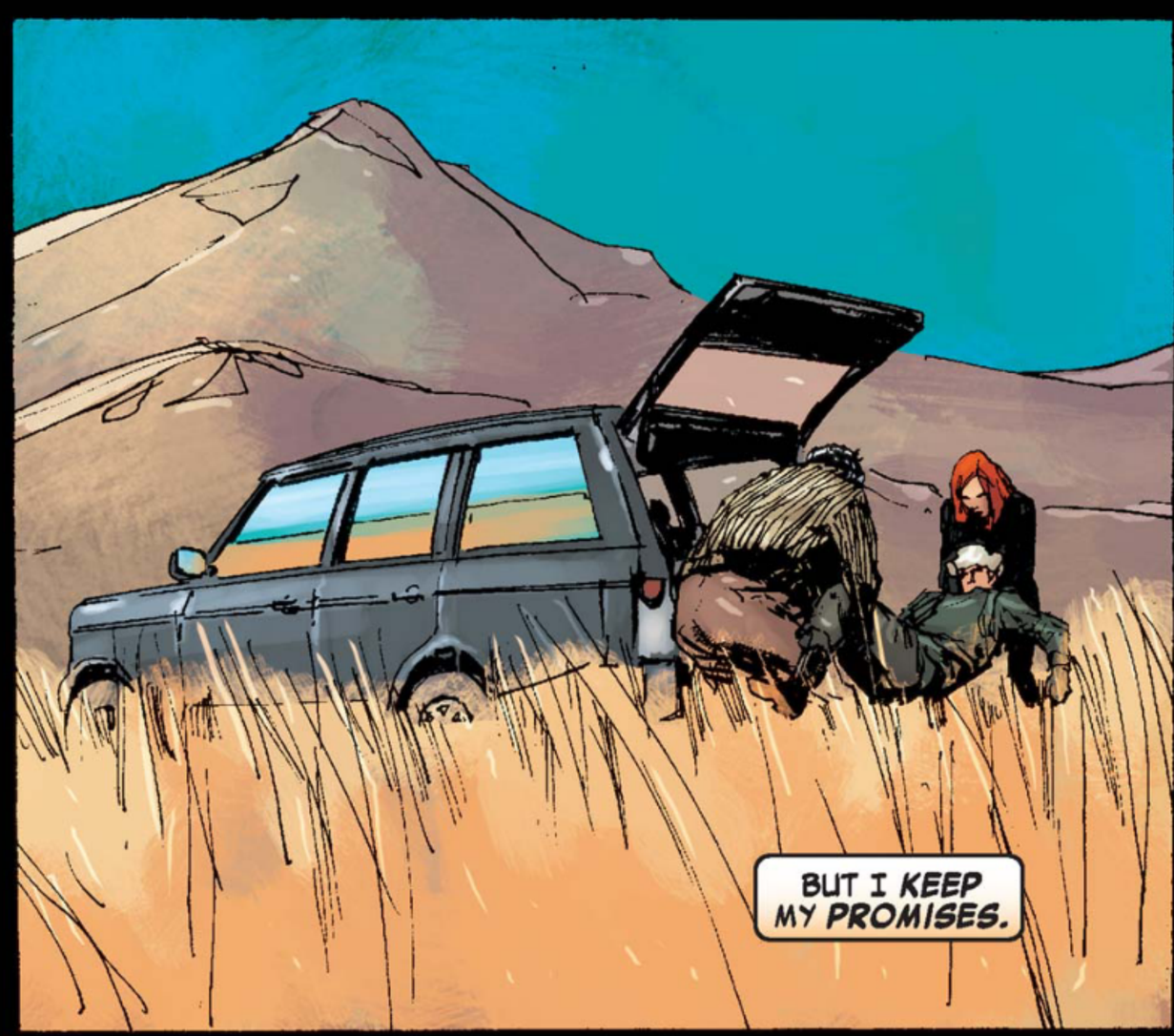
NNRAAGH NNRAAGH
AAAGH!

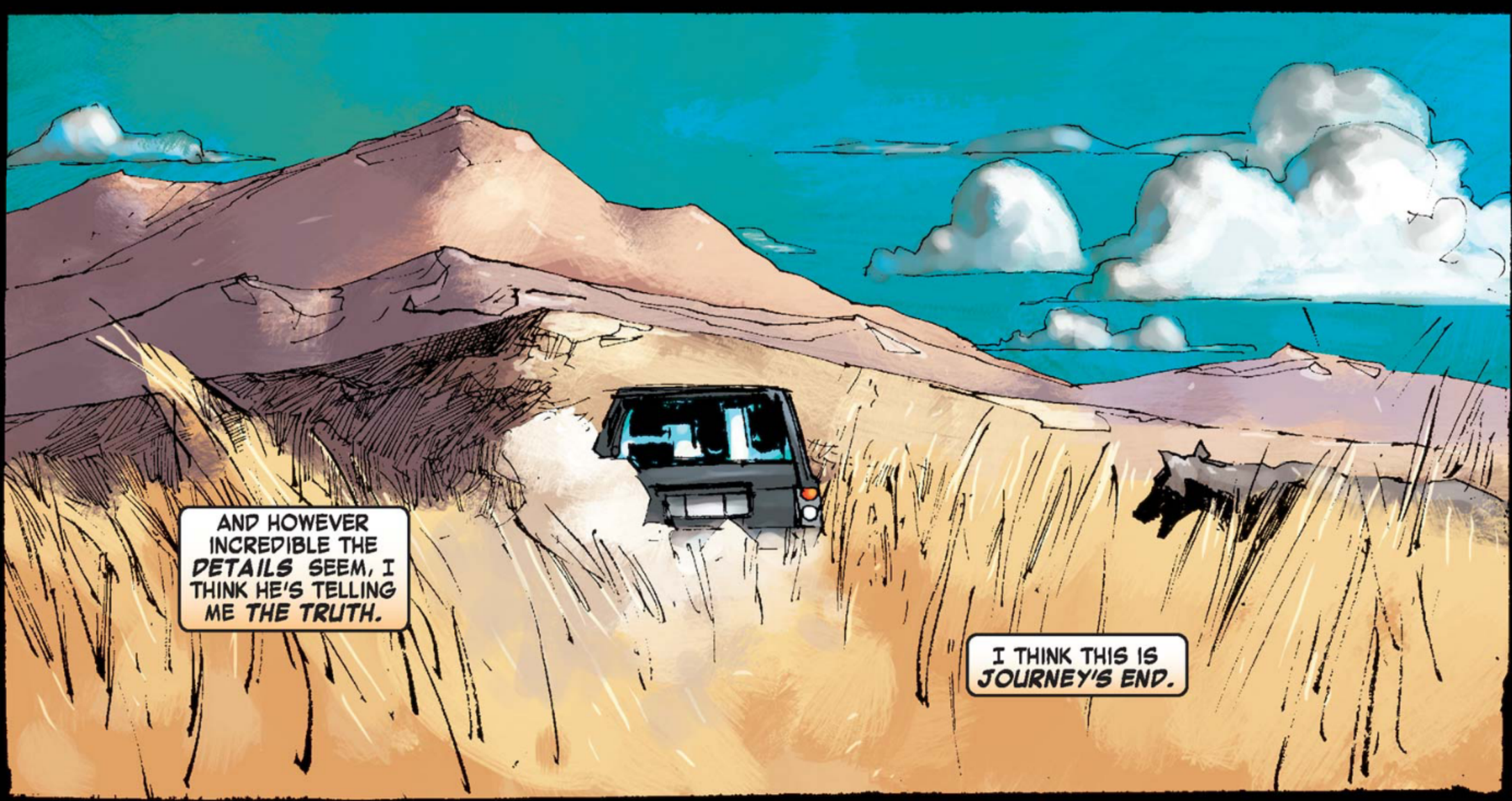

KRAK
LEAVING IT A BIT *LATE*, AREN'T WE?

OKAY, NOW LET'S TALK SENSIBLY. CORRECT ANSWERS GET YOU ONE OF THESE LITTLE SWEETIES, YOUR LIFE AND A RIDE OUT OF HERE.
INCORRECT ANSWERS, WELL--

--ENOUGH INCORRECT ANSWERS AND YOUR FOUR-LEGGED FRIENDS THERE'LL BE PLAYING FETCH WITH YOUR FEMURS TONIGHT.
SO WHAT'S IT GOING TO BE?

HE TALKS.
I CAN'T MAKE UP MY MIND IF I'M HAPPY ABOUT IT OR NOT.


BUT I KEEP MY PROMISES.


AND HOWEVER INCREDIBLE THE DETAILS SEEM, I THINK HE'S TELLING ME THE TRUTH.
I THINK THIS IS JOURNEY'S END.

FREEPORT, GRAND BAHAMA

MMMGHGHGH!
WHAT'D YOU SAY?
SHLIK

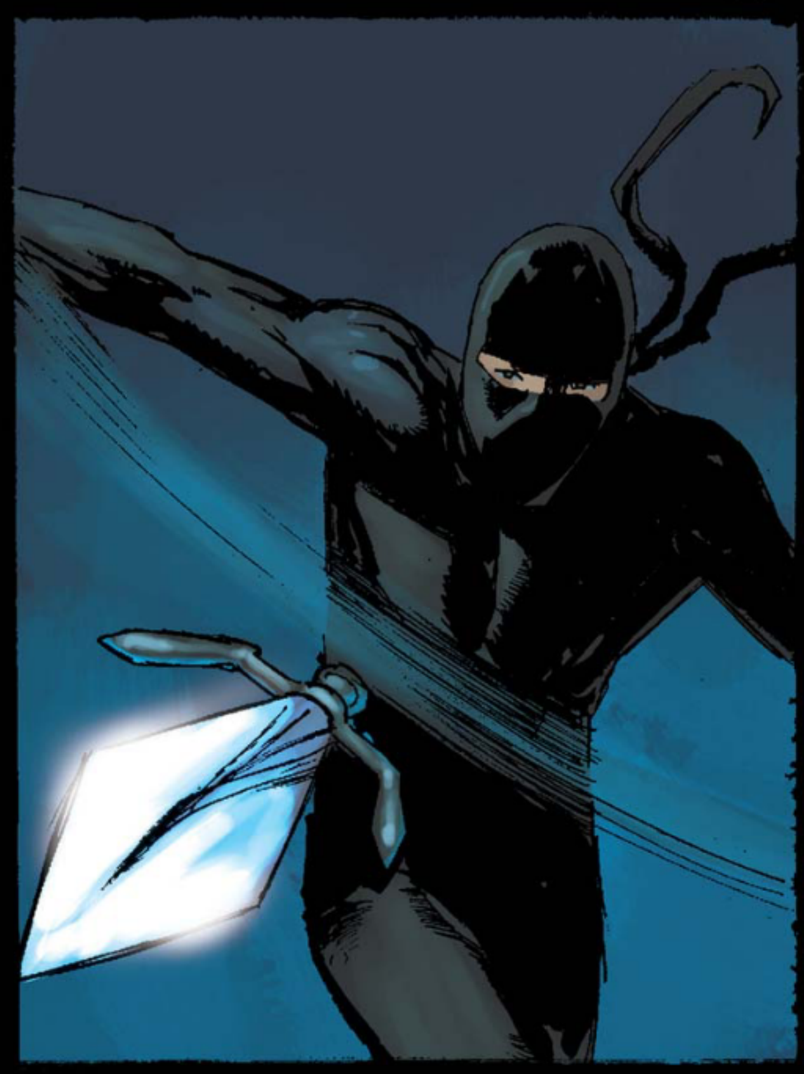
GAAGH!

CLAP-CLAP-CLAP-

REMARKABLE. AND CERTAINLY BETTER THAN YOUR PREDECESSOR.
CLAP-CLAP-CLAP

CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP
BUT NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

I HAD HOPED THAT MR. MCMASTERS' COMPETITORS WOULD LEARN WHEN I SENT THEM JACK MULLAN'S HEAD.
BUT EVIDENTLY NOT.



OH, PLEASE.

KRAAK
AAAAGH!

KLUD
GURRGH

THERE IS ONLY ONE WORD FOR MEN WHO FAIL TO LEARN FROM THEIR MISTAKES...

IMBECILES!
ISN'T IT ENOUGH THAT I'M CONFINED HERE WITH YOU FOOLS IN THE FIRST PLACE? DO I HAVE TO DO EVERY SINGLE THING MYSELF?
NO, MADAME PROFESSOR, IT'S JUST THAT--
YOU GO BACK AND TELL ACADEMICIAN, FORMER ACADEMICIAN FILANOV, TO RUN THE SEQUENCER AGAIN AND MAIL ME THE RESULTS UP HERE. YOU TELL HIM IF--
--AND ONLY IF--I SEE THE SAME TRACE REPEATED ON EACH STRAND, MAYBE I'LL COME DOWN AND SEE ABOUT RE-CALCULATING THE SPLICE.
AND YOU TELL HIM IN THE FUTURE--
--NOT TO BE SUCH A BLOODY OLD WOMAN!

I'D HAVE THOUGHT BEING AN OLD WOMAN WAS PRETTY CLEARLY *MY* PREROGATIVE THESE DAYS.

COME ON IN, MY DEAR.

DON'T HESITATE *FOREVER ON THE THRESHOLD.*

I'VE BEEN WATCHING YOUR PROGRESS ON THE *MONITORS.* IT WAS WISE OF YOU TO WAIT FOR *NIGHTFALL.*

PERHAPS YOU'RE HUNGRY?

YOU...YOU ARE *LYUDMILA KUDRIN?*

LYUDMILA ANTONOVNA KUDRIN, YES. *FOR MY SINS.*

WHY, WHAT DID YOU *EXPECT?*

THE WICKED WITCH OF THE EAST?

CHOOSE ONE. I WOULDN'T EXPECT YOU TO TRUST ME: A WITCH IN A HIDDEN CAVE. A CRONE WHO DRIPS SLIME IN HER TRACKS.
YOU'RE FAMILIAR, NO DOUBT, WITH THE RATHER UNPLEASANT JOKE ABOUT WOMEN AND SNAILS?

YES, I'VE HEARD IT ENOUGH TIMES.
SUCH HATRED IN THAT JOKE. SUCH DISGUST. SUCH A FEAR OF FLUIDS...

WELL, SUFFICE IT TO SAY I GENERATE THIS SLIME ARTIFICIALLY. IN THE LAB. I'M AFRAID REGULAR IMMERSION IS THE ONLY REMEDY FOR THE RAVAGES I'VE VISITED UPON MYSELF.

MY SKIN WON'T STAND UP WELL TO STRONG LIGHT OR AIR THAT'S TOO DRY. I HAVE TO EAT AND DRINK VERY CAREFULLY, TOO. I COUNT EVERY CALORIE.
YOU DID THIS TO YOURSELF?

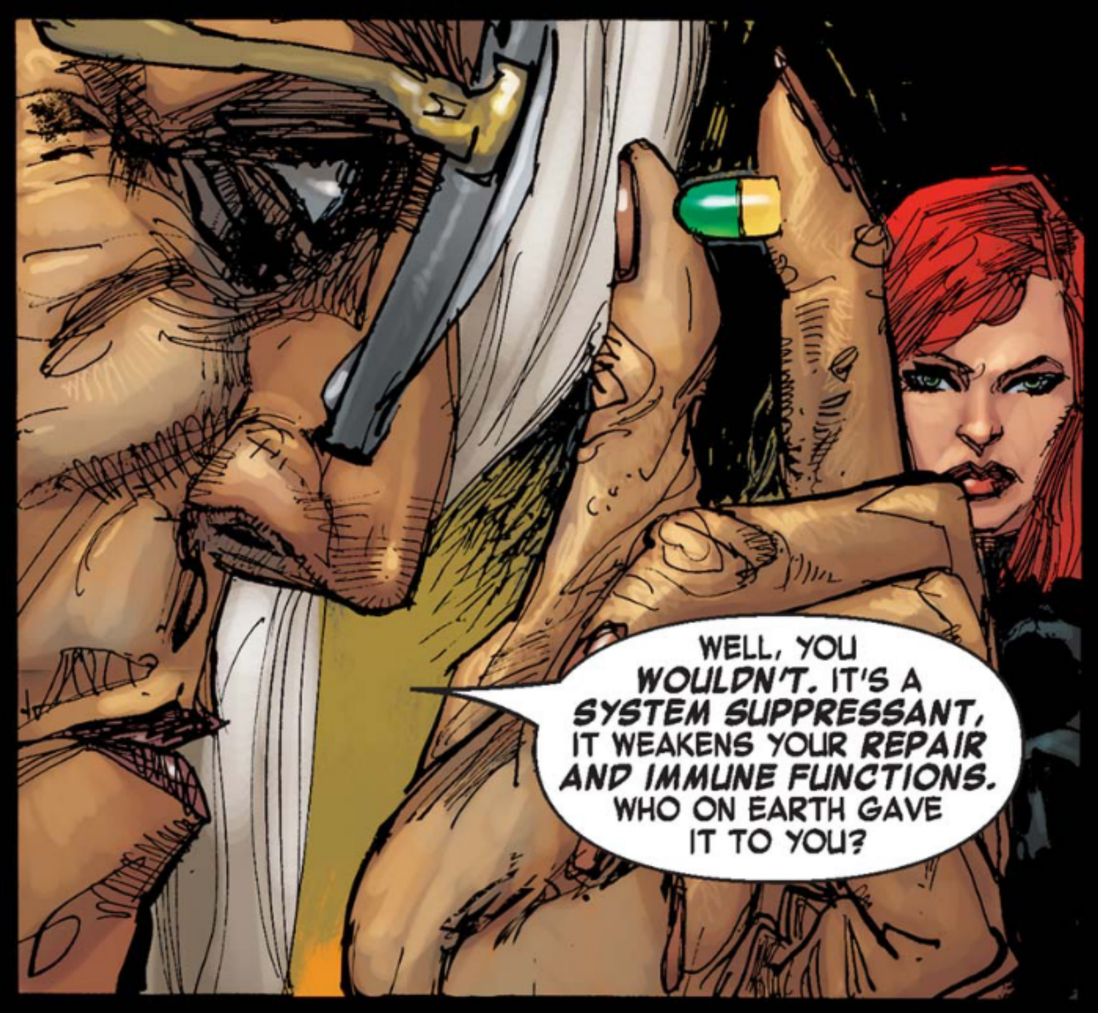
WELL, LOOKING BACK, I THINK I WAS PERHAPS ENCOURAGED BY IRRESPONSIBLE MEN TO RISK THE DAMAGE. WE KNEW SO LITTLE IN THOSE DAYS, YOU SEE. THE TECHNIQUES WERE EXPERIMENTAL. BUT I WAS VERY DETERMINED. I PUSHED TO THE LIMITS.

BUT WHAT ABOUT YOU, MY DAUGHTER?
DAUGHTER??!!

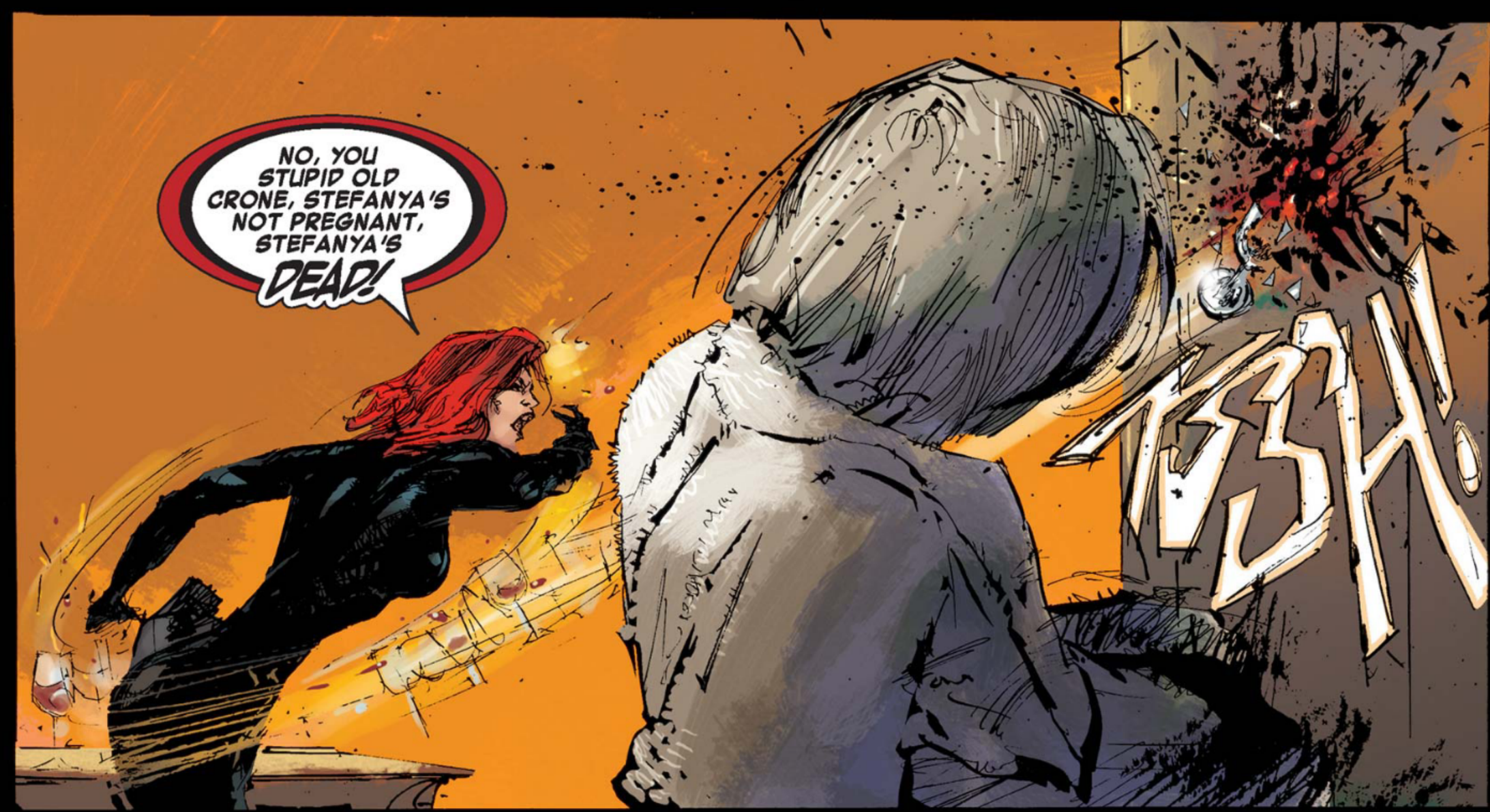
OH, NOT BIOLOGICALLY, OF COURSE. YOU WERE ALL ORPHANS, THE PROJECT PARAMETERS REQUIRED IT. BUT STILL, IN A WAY...
WHAT IS YOUR NAME?
ROMANOVA.
NATALYA.
AH, NATASHA. YES, YOU WERE ALWAYS ONE OF THE STRONGEST. ONE OF THE ANGRIEST. I DON'T THINK YOU EVER FORGAVE YOUR PARENTS FOR DYING.
WHAT DID YOU PEOPLE DO TO ME?
BUT YOU MUST KNOW THAT, NATASHA, IF YOU'VE FOUND THIS PLACE. IF YOU'VE COME THIS FAR.

I KNOW ABOUT THE *MEMORY INDUCEMENT*, THE *HYPNOTIC BLOCKS* FROM THE *CONDITIONING*. NOT THE REST.

I DON'T KNOW WHY I'D NEED TO TAKE *THESE*.
MEDUSAGE


WELL, YOU *WOULDN'T*. IT'S A *SYSTEM SUPPRESSANT*, IT WEAKENS YOUR *REPAIR AND IMMUNE FUNCTIONS*. WHO ON EARTH GAVE IT TO YOU?

NO ONE *GAVE* IT TO ME. I GOT IT FROM *STEFANYA MELNIKOVA'S* PERSONAL EFFECTS. SHE WAS PREGNANT.
PREGNANT? STEFANYA'S *PREGNANT?*


NO, YOU STUPID OLD CRONE, STEFANYA'S NOT PREGNANT, STEFANYA'S DEAD!
ESH!

WHO KILLED HER, THE AMERICANS?
YEAH. I MEAN, NO. SHE...IT'S COMPLICATED.
LOOK, WHY WOULD SHE BE TAKING THIS STUFF?
"IF...SHE WAS PREGNANT, SHE'D NEED TO. SHE'D HAVE TO. WE REWIRED YOU ALL BIOCHEMICALLY. GAVE YOU RAMPED UP IMMUNE AND CELL REPAIR SYSTEMS. ALL THE BLACK WIDOWS HAVE IT.
"YOUR WOUNDS HEAL FOUR, MAYBE FIVE TIMES AS FAST AS A NORMAL HUMAN'S WOULD. YOU HARDLY GET SICK, YOU DON'T AGE AS FAST...
"...YOUR HAIR DOESN'T FALL OUT, YOUR SKIN CAN TAKE WIND AND SUN WITHOUT--"
LYUDMILA, WHAT THE HELL HAS THIS GOT TO DO WITH STEFANYA BEING PREGNANT?

"NATASHA, PREGNANCY IS AN ILLNESS. A WEAKENING. THE FETUS GROSSLY DISTORTS YOUR BODY'S FUNCTIONS AT A PHYSICAL AND A BIOCHEMICAL LEVEL. IT SUCKS AS MUCH NOURISHMENT FROM THE MOTHER AS IT POSSIBLY CAN.
"IT EVEN RUNS HOSTILE BIO-CHEMISTRY THAT TRIES TO TURN YOU INTO A DIABETIC, TO FORCE UP YOUR BLOOD SUGAR BY SUPPRESSING INSULIN PRODUCTION."
THE SYSTEMS WE BUILT INTO YOU WILL RECOGNIZE ALL OF THIS AS AN ATTACK, AND RESPOND ACCORDINGLY.
YOU MEAN--
YES. MISCARRIAGE. AUTOMATIC, AS A FAIL-SAFE. NO BLACK WIDOW CAN EVER HAVE A CHILD.
"I'M SORRY, NATASHA, IT... THE BLACK WIDOW PROGRAM...WE WANTED WARRIORS, NOT MOTHERS."

YOU WANTED...
WHAT GAVE YOU THE RIGHT TO DO THIS TO ME? TO ALL OF US?
AND DON'T TRY PATRIOTISM, 'CAUSE IT'S GOING TO GET YOU A SLAP. I'VE ALREADY HAD A BELLYFUL OF THAT FROM GRIGOR IVANOVICH.
GRIGOR IVA--?
HE'S HERE?

YEAH, I BROUGHT HIM WITH ME FROM MOSCOW. WHY?
NATASHA, OH LITTLE NATUSHKA. I ALWAYS KNEW, IN MY HEART I KNEW, THAT SOME OF YOU WOULD FIND YOUR WAY HOME.

YEAH? IS THAT WHY YOU'RE HAVING US ALL KILLED OFF, THEN?
WHAT?
YOU DON'T...
...YOU DON'T KNOW, DO YOU?

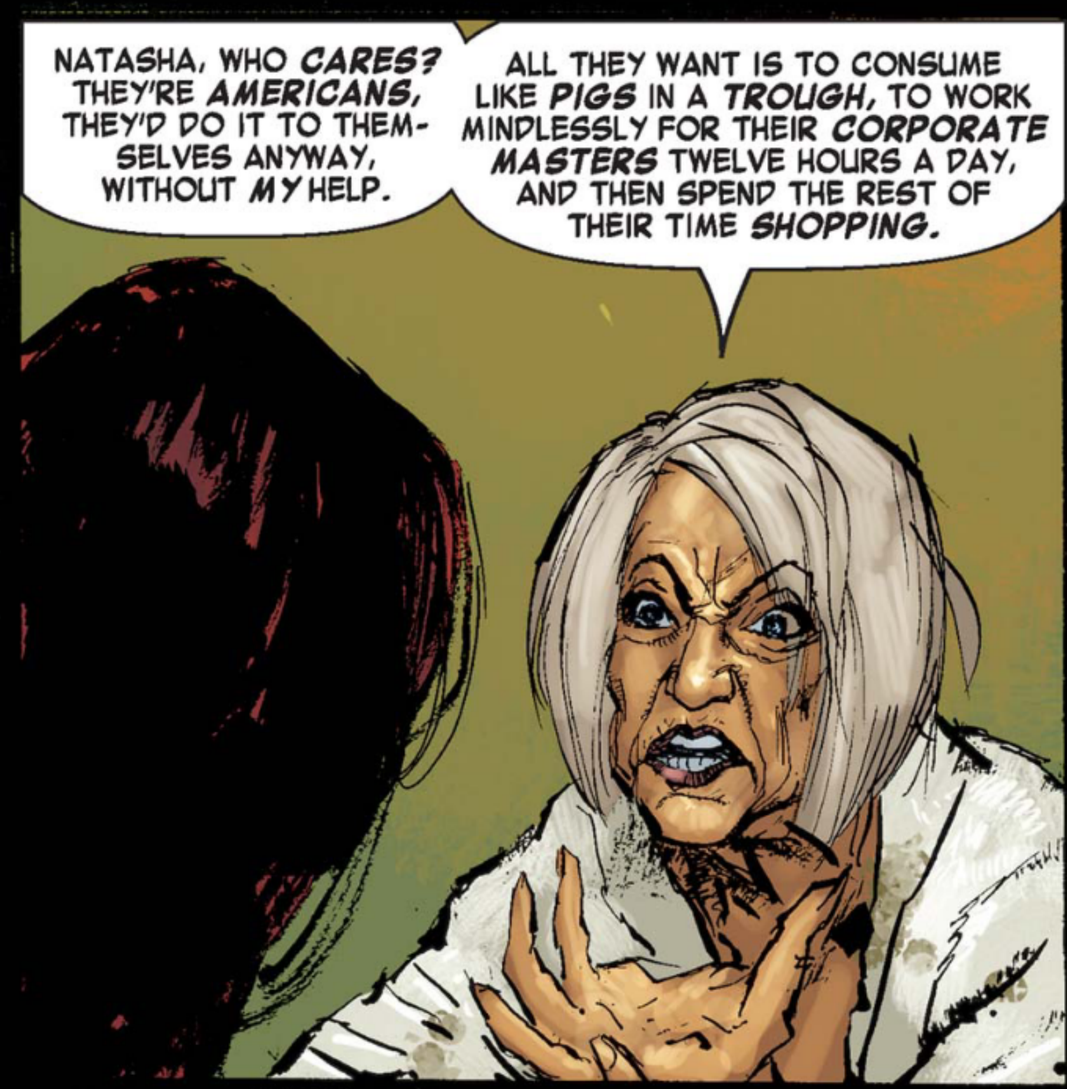
THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE...
NO, THIS IS HAPPENING.
STEFANYA MELNIKOVA WAS MURDERED BY RED ROOM ASSASSINS.

"I NEARLY ENDED UP THE SAME WAY MYSELF.

"AND FROM WHAT I SAW DOWN AT THE OLD SITE, I'M NOT THE FIRST BLACK WIDOW TO COME CALLING.
"I'M JUST THE FIRST NOT TO END UP AS DOG MEAT."

VASSILY...
NOW WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU PEOPLE DOING OUT HERE?

NOTHING. OUR AGENTS IN THE U.S. HAVE ALREADY SOLD MOST OF THE BLACK WIDOW BIOTECH TO SOME CORPORATION THERE. THESE DAYS, WE JUST DO JOY CHEMISTRY. ANTI-DEPRESSANTS, MILD EUPHORICS. DRUGS TO MAKE PEOPLE BETTER WORKERS, HAPPIER CONSUMERS. PAINKILLERS FOR THE SOUL.
YOU CALL THAT NOTHING?


NATASHA, WHO CARES? THEY'RE AMERICANS, THEY'D DO IT TO THEMSELVES ANYWAY, WITHOUT MY HELP.
ALL THEY WANT IS TO CONSUME LIKE PIGS IN A TROUGH, TO WORK MINDLESSLY FOR THEIR CORPORATE MASTERS TWELVE HOURS A DAY, AND THEN SPEND THE REST OF THEIR TIME SHOPPING.

WHAT IS THIS, THE OLD DAYS? YOU'RE STILL SPOUTING THAT PARTY-LINE CRAP?
HAVE YOU EVER EVEN BEEN TO AMERICA, LYUDMILA? HAVE YOU EVER EVEN MET THESE PEOPLE THAT YOU HATE SO MUCH?

I DIDN'T HAVE TO! THEY CAME HERE! THEY CAME HERE WITH THEIR CAPITALISM, AND THEIR MARKET FORCES, AND THEY DESTROYED US, NATASHA. THEY DESTROYED US!
NO. WE DESTROYED OURSELVES. WE DID IT OURSELVES. ALL THEY DID WAS HAND US THE GUN.

THIS STOPS. ALL OF IT. RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW.
KLIK-KLAK

KID, THERE IS JUST NO WAY YOU'D GET ME WEARING SOMETHING LIKE THAT.
BUT YOU SHOULD, YOU'VE GOT THE BUILD FOR--
KIIIIING KIIING!
ALBUQUERQUE

OH GOOD, I'M STARVING.
YEAH, THAT WAS QUICK.

WHO IS IT?
DELIVERY FOR DEXTER. CHAR SIU CHOW MEIN, SZECHUAN CHICKEN, FRIED--
ALL RIGHT, HOLD ON.

S.WAT
S.WAT
AND A FREE ORDER OF SPARE RIBS. SMELLS GOOD.
STEP AWAY FROM THE DOOR.

GET OUT, KID! GET OUT THE BACK!

BLAP BLAP BLAP
BLAM
AAAAGH!!

BLAP BLAP BLAP BAP BLAP
AAAAIEEEGH!
NOOOOOOOOO!!

YOU SON OF A--

BLAM BLAM BLAM BLA

TO BE CONTINUED...